

The stage is dark. The sound of Tibetan bells is heard.

Against the back wall of the living room, pictures are projected. Each shows a young woman at different stages of climbing a difficult rock face. In each picture, she is higher up the face.

As the lights rise, the projections fade, and CARRIE stands on top of the cliff, holding a rope that runs through a belay plate. CARRIE looks over the edge of the cliff. The sound of the bells fades.

CARRIE

On belay!

BARBARA

Slack!

(CARRIE shifts the rope around the belay plate. She looks down at BARBARA, who is still out of sight of the audience, below the lip of the top platform.)

CARRIE

Lookin' good!

BARBARA

Carrie –

CARRIE

You go, woman! You're lookin' fine!

(Sounds of CARRIE struggling on the wall, still out of sight. THE SHERIFF enters, standing upstage in the neutral area. He is illuminated by downlight, and holds a single sheet of paper. He reads stiffly, as if not used to making appearances before large groups of people.)

THE SHERIFF

All right, we have an announcement here, it reads as follows...

CARRIE

C'mon, Barb! You can do it!

BARBARA

Well, actually, ah --

CARRIE

Yes you can!

SHERIFF

The Sheriff's office for the County of Durango –

BARBARA

I don't think I can –

SHERIFF

-- has been advised that Ms. Carrie Bering --

CARRIE

You definitely can!

SHERIFF

-- has been reported as missing as of the evening of June 7th.

BARBARA

Carrie!

SHERIFF

Ms. Bering –

CARRIE

Don't even think of quitting on me now!

SHERIFF

-- who is a champion rock climber –

CARRIE

Delete that thought!

SHERIFF

-- and who resides in the City of Culver –

CARRIE

You are *definitely* going to make it!

SHERIFF

-- County of Durango –

BARBARA

Oh, God –

SHERIFF

-- was last seen on the morning of the 7th by her husband, Mark.

CARRIE

This is going to happen, Barb –

SHERIFF

At that time, she was wearing Spandex climbing pants –

CARRIE

you're going to make it happen –

SHERIFF

-- color purple --

BARBARA

Oh, shit!

SHERIFF

-- and a red tee shirt.

CARRIE

You're almost here!

SHERIFF

Her car was found by relatives off of State Road 23 –

BARBARA

Oh, Jesus –

SHERIFF

-- near the entrance to the Spider Canyon state reserve.

CARRIE

You got it, babe!

(BARBARA's hands reach the top platform. BARBARA hauls herself up and finally comes into the audience's view. She stretches out along the rock. CARRIE hauls up a backpack that has been suspended on a rope.)

SHERIFF

Search parties have been organized, including several Mountain Rescue Teams located in the city of Culver, members of this Sheriff's office, including our canine units, and volunteers from the surrounding area. Any persons having information as to the whereabouts of Ms. Bering are asked to contact this office immediately.

(THE SHERIFF looks up from the paper and scans the room. CARRIE rummages through the pack and pulls out an energy bar.)

CARRIE

You look like you might need one of these.

BARBARA

Water.

SHERIFF

No, there is no indication of criminal activity at this time...

(CARRIE pulls a water bottle out of one of the pack's side pockets and hands it to BARBARA, who drinks.)

We're not going to speculate about that...

BARBARA

Thanks.

SHERIFF

No, no...

CARRIE

Six months ago--

SHERIFF

All right, that's it --

CARRIE

you wouldn't have made it past that pitch.

SHERIFF

-- no more questions at this time...

BARBARA

Six months ago --

SHERIFF

We'll tell you more when we know more, people.

BARBARA

I wouldn't have made it out of the car at the bottom.

CARRIE

And six months from now --

BARBARA

I can't think that far ahead.

(The two women on the cliff lay down to rest on top of the cliff. THE SHERIFF steps out of the downlight and moves forward to address the audience.)

SHERIFF

I knew this was going to be a pain in the ass right from the get-go. Next to a couple of movie stars over in the foothills near Muserville, Carrie Bering is as close as we've got to a celebrity. I knew there would be media, which would be a pain in the ass, and I knew I'd have to deal with a bunch of hippie climbers, you know the type, the ones who keep trying to reinvent the Sixties, and that was going to be a pain in the ass. But I had a few cards to play. The Mountain Rescue people over in Culver, well, they're leftovers from the Sixties, too, but they're real good at what they do. The best in the business, in fact. And you gotta say this about the climbers, the ones around here, they're a close-knit bunch -- there wasn't a single soul who wasn't out looking for this woman. We had plenty of folks out in the field. I figured if she was out there, we'd find her.

(THE SHERIFF exits. Lights cross-fade back to the cliff. BARBARA goes to the upstage edge of the platform and looks down.)

BARBARA

Please tell me that's a 5.8.

CARRIE

Nah. 5.7. Borderline at that.

BARBARA

I don't want to imagine what a 5.10 must be like.

CARRIE

You're already imagining it. You've got the fever, I can tell.

BARBARA

I may have the fever, but you have the skill. This was nothing for you. A picnic. A Sunday afternoon romp.

CARRIE

It's my job. Before long, you'll make it look easy.

BARBARA

This is never going to get easy. Not unless someone develops a magic wand for climbers.

CARRIE

That's it.

BARBARA

What?

CARRIE

You just named the route.

BARBARA

What are you talking about?

CARRIE

No one's climbed here before. So we get to name the route.

BARBARA

You're kidding me. No one's – really?

CARRIE

That's why Mark wanted to settle here, start the school here. So many virgin routes. You can write it up, we'll put it in *Rock and Ice*. Next year there'll be so many climbers here you won't be able to see the rock for the people.

BARBARA

I can't write.

CARRIE

You mean you've never written before.

BARBARA

No, I mean I can't.

CARRIE

Says who? You think Mark got all the good communication skills in your family? You weren't swimming in the gene pool that day?

BARBARA

I've never written anything.

CARRIE

Then it's time you tried. I don't know, maybe you'll suck. Or maybe you'll be great. You write it well, this will be the next hot place.

BARBARA

No shit?

CARRIE

No shit. And you just named the first route. We'll call it *Prestidigitation*. You know, magic wand, prestidigitation. Whadda you think?

BARBARA

I like it.

(Lights cross-fade to the living room. MARK paces; THE SHERIFF sits on the couch and takes notes.)

THE SHERIFF

Mr. Bering, you say you found her car up near Spider Canyon?

MARK

That's right. Once we realized that – once it got toward dark and she hadn't come home, we started looking.

THE SHERIFF

And you went to Spider Canyon because –

MARK

We didn't go there first.

THE SHERIFF

Where did you go?

MARK

Easter Creek, Deep River, Jenner's pass.

THE SHERIFF

And you went to those places –

MARK

They were all places where Carrie liked to climb. Where we had climbed together.

THE SHERIFF

That's a lot of ground to cover in one night, Easter Creek must be ninety miles from --

MARK

I had called some friends. We split it up, kept in touch by cell phone.

THE SHERIFF

Had you climbed in Spider Canyon?

MARK

Never. We'd talked about exploring it, seeing whether there were decent routes.

THE SHERIFF

Routes to -- ?

MARK

Climbing routes.

THE SHERIFF

Oh. What time did you get to Spider Canyon?

MARK

It was almost light, a little after six in the morning.

THE SHERIFF

What did you find when you got there?

MARK

The car was by the side of the highway. The door was locked. She'd left her wallet under the mat on the floor.

THE SHERIFF

Does she always do that?

MARK

If she's climbing, yeah.

THE SHERIFF

Not the best way to hang on to your property, Mr. Bering.

MARK

She's a country girl, Sheriff. She trusts people.

THE SHERIFF

So you think she went climbing.

MARK

That's not what I thought at first. She left all her gear here. I didn't think she would have gone climbing alone without pro.

SHERIFF

Pro?

MARK

Protection, if you have someone on belay.

SHERIFF

On –

MARK

Someone holding the other end of the rope, to catch you. All the gear you use to hold the rope in place on the rock walls -- she left it all here in the house.

SHERIFF

I see. What did you do after you found the car?

MARK

There was a cliff with some good rock about a quarter mile away. I headed that way –

SHERIFF

I thought you said she wouldn't climb without a rope –

MARK

When I saw the cliff, I thought maybe she picked up someone in town, one of the other climbers, you know, just found a partner, someone with their own rack of equipment, and went.

SHERIFF

You folks do that kind of thing –

MARK

Yeah, all the time, it's informal, you know – but it doesn't make any sense, her harness is here – that's what you tie the rope onto...

SHERIFF

What happened next?

MARK

Bryce – that's Bryce Nickell, he's another climber, he was with me – he checked up the road, both directions. We both kept calling her name, but – we called the others who were out looking, they all came out to the canyon. Then I called you.

THE SHERIFF

Anything unusual about the car when you found it?

MARK

No. The door was locked. She's not *that* trusting.

THE SHERIFF

Glad to hear it. Is there anybody who dislikes your wife enough to –

MARK

Nobody. Carrie's your friend the moment you meet her.

THE SHERIFF

She climbs competitively, was there anyone who –

MARK

No one. Listen, if there's nothing else, I'd like to get back to the canyon –

THE SHERIFF

There's something I've got to ask I'm sorry I have to – Can you tell me where you were that day, before you came home and found she wasn't here?

MARK

In the morning, I was with some clients at the indoor wall at Mountain Paradise, that's where I do our ground school. Teach them knots, get them fitted with a harness, that sort of thing.

THE SHERIFF

Right. And the afternoon?

MARK

I took them out to the Coyote wall at Breed's Gap. It's got some good routes for beginners.

THE SHERIFF

The people you were teaching --

MARK

A husband and wife, from someplace back east. Their name is Hegarty. They said they were staying at a B & B over in Muserville.

THE SHERIFF

You remember the name –

MARK

Of the –

THE SHERIFF

Of the B & B.

MARK

It was something to do with fruit – “The Apple Tree,” I think.

THE SHERIFF

Would you have a credit card receipt, some way we could get a home address for these people?

MARK

They paid cash, so I didn't –

THE SHERIFF

I understand. I'll have one of my boys head over to Muserville, check it out. Do you have a recent picture of your wife, something that we can –

MARK

Sure. Here, this is – this was on our wedding day.

SHERIFF

We need something we can use to reproduce for the search parties, I don't want to take something that's got sentimental value –

MARK

Take it, I've got another copy.

SHERIFF

Do you think she might have...could she have just taken off for a few days, just to be by herself?

MARK

No. She's not the type.

SHERIFF

I know, but sometimes –

MARK

There wasn't anything wrong.

SHERIFF

You both seem like busy people. Sometimes, with stress and all –

MARK

Here. Let me show you something.

(MARK picks up a remote control for a television, points it at the audience, and clicks a button.)

This is the kind of person Carrie is.

(THE STRANGER enters the neutral area. He is wearing headphones and carries a microphone. CARRIE enters from the opposite side of the stage.)

CARRIE

OH, YEAH!

THE STRANGER

This is Don Fisher for ESPN 2 --

CARRIE

Woo-woo! Wooooo!

THE STRANGER

And we're here with Carrie Bering, the winner of this year's Powder Gulch bouldering competition.

CARRIE

All right!

THE STRANGER

Carrie, the problem that you tackled to win looked as if it required a climber with a much longer reach.

CARRIE

Oh, yeah, Don, that's the way it looked to me, but I was *not* going to be denied.

THE STRANGER

At one point, you looked as though you were being stretched on the rack.

CARRIE

I took one look at this boulder – and I said to myself, ‘this is so *sick!*’ They didn't name it *Def Con 1* for nothing. And when I got to the crux – whoah!

THE STRANGER

What was going through your mind at that point?

CARRIE

You have to go for it, you know, you can't ever hold anything back. You have to respect the rock, but you also have to respect yourself. If the rock wins that round, well – but that's not the way it went today.

THE STRANGER

No, it certainly wasn't. What's next for you?

CARRIE

I'm really excited, I'll be flying to Austria for the next World Cup in Imst. Competitive climbing is so big over there, they have thousands of people who come out to watch, they're very knowledgeable about the sport.

THE STRANGER

Do you prefer indoor climbing?

CARRIE

Doesn't matter whether I'm inside or outside, as long as I keep going up.

THE STRANGER

Good luck in Austria.

CARRIE

Thanks, Don. Can I say hello to the folks back home?

THE STRANGER

Sure.

CARRIE

Hey, mom, hey dad, I love you guys! And Mark – love ya, hon! Barb, you're my sis!

THE STRANGER

And that wraps it up from New Mexico and the Powder Gulch!

(MARK hits a button on the remote; CARRIE and THE STRANGER freeze in place. He hits another button and the lights fade on the neutral area. CARRIE and THE STRANGER exit.)

MARK

She thrives on pressure, sheriff. The tougher things get, the more energy she has, the more she smiles and gets back to work. She didn't just leave.

SHERIFF

I had to ask.

MARK

I understand. Are we -- ? I've got to get to the airport to pick up Carrie's mom. She's going to man the phones here, I'm going back out to Spider Canyon --

THE SHERIFF

I think we're done here. Let me know if you find anything.

MARK

I'll call.

THE SHERIFF

Good luck.

MARK

Thanks.

(Lights cross-fade from the living room to the cliff.)

CARRIE

The first ascent in Spider Canyon. One for the record books.

BARBARA

I like it.

CARRIE

God, it's beautiful here.

BARBARA

How many have you done?

CARRIE

How many what?

BARBARA

First ascents.

CARRIE

I stopped counting before I turned twenty. A lot, I guess. Not many the last couple of years. The sport climbing, you know, not a lot of time. No prize money for first ascents in Spider Canyon.

BARBARA

You were doing this when you were a teenager?

CARRIE

It's the best time. You're not smart enough to be scared of anything. So you see, you're one up on me.

BARBARA

How do you figure that?

CARRIE

You started when you were almost thirty. *Much* harder. No doubt.

(Lights cross-fade as THE SHERIFF enters the neutral area.)

THE SHERIFF

I know that most of you have been at this for a couple of days now, I know we're all tired and anxious, but it's important to remember – stay close together. Don't get so far from the next person over that there's any danger that you could miss anything. Anything – a scrap of clothing, blood, uprooted foliage – anything might be a clue, so keep your eyes sharp. Stay alert.

(Lights cross-fade to the living room. MARK is on his cell phone.)

MARK

No, there wasn't anything that turned up there. They're finishing up in Spider Canyon tomorrow... Right...Right...Rafe, I can't tell you what this means to me...Having you guys here will be...Still, it's...Yeah...

(BARBARA enters, holding a suitcase.)

I gotta go, my sister's here. See you tomorrow...Right.

(MARK folds the cell phone and sweeps BARBARA into his arms.)

Oh, God! God.

BARBARA

I know, I know.

MARK

Thank God you're here.

BARBARA

Nothing could've kept me away.

(CARRIE comes crawling slowly out from behind the cliff. Her leg trails behind her, and she is obviously in tremendous pain. She crawls toward her backpack, which lies on the floor downstage.)

MARK

There are people coming from all over the country. Rafe and Jackie are coming in from Eugene tomorrow morning.

BARBARA

That's wonderful.

MARK

We'll have over 150 people searching by tomorrow noon.

BARBARA

At least the days are long, lots of light. Tell me where we're going.

MARK

It's no place you've ever been, about 45 minutes outside of town.

BARBARA

Which direction?

MARK

Here.

(MARK pulls out a map and opens it. CARRIE continues to struggle towards the backpack.)

We found the car here.

BARBARA

And there wasn't anything –

MARK

Just her wallet under the mat on the driver's side.

BARBARA

She always does that.

MARK

I know.

BARBARA

Did she have anything else with her?

MARK

Her backpack.

BARBARA

What was in it?

(CARRIE reaches the backpack and unzips its main compartment. She pulls out a cell phone.)

MARK

She had her phone.

BARBARA

Thank God, maybe –

MARK

I certainly hope so.

(CARRIE dials a number on the cell phone. She waits.)

Every time the phone rings, I'm hoping that –

BARBARA

We'll hear from her –

CARRIE

Shit!

MARK

God, I hope you're right.

(Shivering, CARRIE tries dialing the number again. Nothing is happening.)

CARRIE

Shit! Damn it, GOD DAMN IT!

(CARRIE rolls onto her side as she tosses the phone away. This movement causes her terrible pain and she screams, gripping her leg. Eventually, she picks up the pack again and removes a second tee shirt.)

MARK

She'd have her sunglasses –

(Laboriously, CARRIE sits up and puts on the shirt, over the one she's already wearing.)

First aid, maybe a fresh shirt.

(CARRIE pulls out a zipped fleece jacket. She pulls it on and zips it all the way to the top.)

MARK

She usually has her fleece with her.

BARBARA

At least she won't freeze.

MARK

It gets pretty cold up there at night, even this time of year. If she's in shock –

BARBARA

She's very tough, Mark, you know that –

MARK

They're gonna have a chopper out tonight, it's got infrared –

BARBARA

We'll find her.

MARK

It's been three days, --

BARBARA

-- if anyone can, she'll --

MARK

I know, I just -- I just --

(BARBARA takes MARK in her arms as he begins to cry. CARRIE lies down with her back on the ground.)

CARRIE

Oh, God!

BARBARA

I know, sweetie, I know.

CARRIE

God. Please. Help me! HELP ME!

(Lights cross-fade to THE SHERIFF as he steps into the downstage end of the neutral area.)

THE SHERIFF

Everyone leaves something behind. No one just vanishes. No one. So, when the days went by and we didn't find this young woman -- when we found nothing other than the car -- it wasn't surprising that people started to get frustrated. Physical evidence is important for morale. If you find some torn bit of cloth, it's something you can hold in your hand, it makes you feel as if there's a trail that's eventually going to lead somewhere. But we didn't have anything like that. Nothing. It was weird. It made you feel as if there was some other power behind it all. Not that that idea made any sense either, but the mind plays tricks when it's searching for hope. So we kept looking for the tangible things -- but I knew we had to step back and take a broader view. Maybe, if we couldn't follow a trail of physical evidence, we could follow a trail of relationships.

(THE SHERIFF exits as the lights cross-fade to the cliff.)

BARBARA

Can I ask you something?

CARRIE

Sure?

BARBARA

How did you get to be you?

CARRIE

I just kept climbing, that's all. If I'd had to think about it, I would've turned into someone else.

BARBARA

I don't believe that.

(The two women lie back on the rock and bask in the sun.)

We'll have to bring Mark up here sometime.

CARRIE

Good luck.

BARBARA

You don't think he'd like –

CARRIE

If you can get him to come up here, more power to you.

BARBARA

I don't understand.

CARRIE

Except for what he needs to do, you know, things connected to the school, he doesn't leave the ground much any more.

BARBARA

He's writing?

CARRIE

Yeah. And buying things.

BARBARA

Such as?

CARRIE

You name it.

(Lights cross-fade as MARK enters the living room. He picks up a remote control and points it at the audience. He clicks a button and the sound of a television show is heard. He clicks another button, and the sound of a sporting event is heard. He clicks once again and the sound of a television commercial is heard. CARRIE enters, carrying a grocery bag. MARK turns to her, smiling.)

MARK

What do you think?

CARRIE

It's –

MARK

It's a television.

CARRIE

That's not a television, it's a wall. I feel like I ought to climb it.

MARK

Well, it's an entertainment center.

CARRIE

It's so –

MARK

It's got a VCR. Look –

(MARK picks up a remote control and punches a button.)

That's you at Arco.

CARRIE

Great.

MARK

You're just getting to the crux –

CARRIE

We've never even owned a radio. Except in the car.

MARK

I thought it was about time. It's paid for. The school's doing well. I can't believe what people will pay.

CARRIE

Right.

MARK

What is it?

CARRIE

I'm just getting used to –

MARK

To...?

CARRIE

To having so much *stuff*. I remember a time when all we owned was our gear and this.

(The sound of Tibetan bells is heard. CARRIE picks up a corner of the prayer rug.)

Remember when we bought this?

(THE STRANGER, dressed in white robes, and wearing a turban on his head, enters the neutral area.)

MARK

Islamabad.

CARRIE

The man in the bazaar.

THE STRANGER

It is a rug for prayer, for meditation!

MARK

The ad people here could've learned some things from that guy.

THE STRANGER

A miraculous rug! Works for all faiths!

CARRIE

He was persuasive.

THE STRANGER

Mohammed, Jesus, Moses, Buddha – it makes no difference!

CARRIE

And when we took it with us to base camp –

THE STRANGER

No difference at all!

MARK

And unrolled it on the floor after we pitched our tent --

THE STRANGER

You place yourself, sitting, on the rug –

MARK

I doubt he would have considered what we did prayer.

THE STRANGER

You pray –

CARRIE

I did call on God a lot that night.

THE STRANGER

All prayers will be answered!

(Lights fade out on THE STRANGER. The sound of the Tibetan bells fades. CARRIE leans over and kisses MARK.)

CARRIE

Care to say a few prayers, mountain man?

MARK

Now?

CARRIE

Yeah, now.

MARK

I can't.

CARRIE

Why not? It's a good time to pray. I'm feeling especially sacred.

MARK

I've got another lecture –

(CARRIE sits up straight.)

CARRIE

“Disaster on K2.”

MARK

Right. In Boston.

CARRIE

When?

MARK

Tomorrow. I fly out tonight.

You didn't tell me. CARRIE

I didn't know... MARK

How I'd feel about it? CARRIE

Well...yeah. MARK

Are you sure... CARRIE

What? MARK

That it's – CARRIE

What? MARK

That you want to – CARRIE

Want to -- ? MARK

Go through it again? CARRIE

I was there. MARK

That doesn't mean you have to relive it every time someone writes a check. CARRIE

People want to know. MARK

That's why you wrote the book. CARRIE

MARK

So, now people want to meet me.

CARRIE

Isn't it enough that –

MARK

And it pays the rent.

CARRIE

The rent's paid, Mark. The book, the school, it's all doing fine, we have more than we could ever possibly use.

MARK

It can't hurt.

CARRIE

I'm not so sure.

MARK

Every little bit –

CARRIE

I wasn't talking about the bank account.

MARK

I'm fine. I'm fine.

CARRIE

Need a ride to the airport?

MARK

Cool.

CARRIE

You'll miss Barb.

MARK

She's coming out?

CARRIE

Tomorrow.

MARK

At least you'll have some company.

(Lights cross-fade to BARBARA in the downstage portion of the neutral

area.)

BARBARA

Before I knew Carrie, I was a lizard. That's what French climbers used to call someone who clings too tightly to the rock, someone who's afraid to move. I was holding on to my life, clutching things I thought were important. With Carrie – there was something about her, it was like you could see into her, see some of the things she understood, even when you hadn't know her very long. She was open to everything, to everyone. The first time she took me climbing, I could see that most everything I thought I'd learned about life was bullshit. We were driving there, and we were talking, in the car.

(CARRIE enters the upstage portion of the neutral area, carrying two folding chairs. She sets them up, and BARBARA sits next to CARRIE. CARRIE drives.)

BARBARA

So where are you off to next?

CARRIE

England. Birmingham.

BARBARA

Then you'll come back?

CARRIE

Nope. Next I'm going to Slovenia.

BARBARA

Slovenia? Isn't that near Bosnia?

CARRIE

It's in the general vicinity.

BARBARA

How does Mark feel about your trotting all over the globe?

CARRIE

Hey, this is your brother we're talking about. He lives the same way.

BARBARA

But you guys are buying a house –

CARRIE

That's just a base camp.

BARBARA

Oh.

(beat)

I don't know how you do it.

CARRIE

What?

BARBARA

You never settle down.

CARRIE

It's what I do.

BARBARA

Yeah, but –

CARRIE

You know why I love my life?

BARBARA

Because you're always off on an adventure?

CARRIE

That's right. You know what the adventure is?

BARBARA

When you climb. So you have to go wherever you can climb –

CARRIE

That's not it.

BARBARA

Then what?

CARRIE

The adventure is laying your head down in a different place, in a strange bed, every night. Knowing you'll see something new, something you don't know much about, as soon as the dawn rolls around. Trusting that you'll figure out what to do, no matter what. That's what keeps things from getting stale.

BARBARA

I couldn't live like that.

CARRIE

That's because the scales haven't fallen from your eyes yet.

I beg your pardon.

BARBARA

Open the window.

CARRIE

What?

BARBARA

Open the window.

CARRIE

(BARBARA mimes opening the window of the car.)

My God! Pine!

BARBARA

Spruce, actually, but I won't hold it against you.

CARRIE

It's – It's so --

BARBARA

I know. Take a deep breath.

CARRIE

(BARBARA moves back toward the mountain. CARRIE takes the chairs off stage.)

BARBARA
At that moment, I felt like a little girl, before I knew that there were some things that girls weren't supposed to do. We didn't say anything for a long time. She just smiled, and let me drink it all in. What she taught me was so important, but the things she let me learn were priceless. Which is why not knowing wears away a small measure of my soul every day.

(BARBARA exits as the lights cross-fade to MARK and THE SHERIFF in the living room.)

THE SHERIFF
I wish I had some good news, Mark.

MARK
I've been thinking –

(BARBARA enters, carrying a tray. On the other side of the stage, CARRIE enters, handcuffed. THE STRANGER, his hair matted, dressed in ratty outdoor clothes, enters behind her, pointing a pistol at her.)

BARBARA

I made some iced tea –

THE STRANGER

Down – on your knees – GET DOWN!

CARRIE

I –

THE STRANGER

ON YOUR KNEES! NOW!

(CARRIE complies.)

BARBARA

Sheriff, can I get you something else, would you like –

SHERIFF

No, this is fine, thanks.

THE STRANGER

That's better.

SHERIFF

The only evidence we've found –

MARK

Points to the canyon –

THE STRANGER

That's good.

SHERIFF

Exactly. And because so far there's been no direct evidence of, well –

THE STRANGER

I like the view now.

SHERIFF

It's made sense to concentrate the search there.

CARRIE

Please –

SHERIFF

Assuming, of course, that she decided to do some climbing –

THE STRANGER

Of course --

SHERIFF

maybe fell –

THE STRANGER

I'd like it even better --

SHERIFF

or maybe got off trail –

THE STRANGER

-- it would fulfill me --

SHERIFF

-- got lost.

THE STRANGER

-- if you bent over a little.

SHERIFF

But then...

CARRIE

Please don't –

(THE STRANGER kneels next to CARRIE.)

MARK

You're saying –

THE STRANGER

What's the matter?

SHERIFF

We should look at other possibilities.

THE STRANGER

You don't want to kiss Mother Earth?

BARBARA
What possibilities?

SHERIFF
I'm not saying she was abducted --

CARRIE
What are you going to --

SHERIFF
I am saying we can't rule it out.

(THE STRANGER grabs her by the hair and pulls her head back.)

THE STRANGER
I SAID BEND OVER AND EAT THE DIRT!

(THE STRANGER forces CARRIE to bend over so that her face is on the ground.)

MARK
God.

(THE STRANGER runs his hands over CARRIE's body.)

CARRIE
Please --

THE STRANGER
Shut up.

SHERIFF
And because we can't rule it out --

CARRIE
Please don't --

SHERIFF
-- we've got to think about changing the way we're approaching the search.

(THE STRANGER places the muzzle of his pistol against CARRIE's temple.)

THE STRANGER
You feel that?

MARK

What are you going to do?

CARRIE

I – I –

SHERIFF

I'm moving some of the search teams over to Jenner's Pass –

THE STRANGER

Do you feel it?

SHERIFF

and one over to Deep River.

CARRIE

Yes!

SHERIFF

They're both closer to where the car was found than Easter Creek.

THE STRANGER

One little squeeze --

SHERIFF

If somebody took her –

THE STRANGER

-- and everything inside your head will be blown out of your skull.

SHERIFF

They might still be close by.

THE STRANGER

Is that what you want?

MARK

Unless they drove away in another car.

THE STRANGER

Is it?

BARBARA

They could be –

CARRIE

No!

SHERIFF

We found some hikers who were out near the Canyon three days ago—

THE STRANGER

Then you just keep your mouth shut --

SHERIFF

-- walking up 23 from Lemon Arch Valley.

THE STRANGER

-- until I tell you I want it open.

SHERIFF

They said there were only a couple of vehicles that passed them on the road.

THE STRANGER

-- you understand?

SHERIFF

There was a semi, an eighteen-wheeler –

(CARRIE nods.)

THE SHERIFF

and a blue van.

(THE STRANGER removes his shirt.)

SHERIFF

I've called the FBI, we're trying to trace –

MARK

Oh, God.

(THE STRANGER kneels behind CARRIE, and begins to rub against her.)

BARBARA

She could be anywhere.

THE STRANGER

That's better. Much better.

(Lights fade on CARRIE and THE STRANGER.)

SHERIFF

I can't sugarcoat it, Ms. Bering. I'll let you folks know if we hear anything.

(Lights cross-fade as BARBARA moves to the base of the cliff. She takes hold of a climbing rope which hangs from the top of the cliff.)

BARBARA

The rope is your life. I learned that early. You take a really evil whipper or two – that is, if you take some nasty falls – you catch on quickly. Rock is the present, the rope the highway between yesterday and tomorrow. Everything that you are, everything that you've been, everything you know, that all exists on the part of the rope that's running from the ground to your last bit of protection. The rest of the rope, from the protection to your harness, that's the future -- hopes, fears, all the possibilities that exist on the earth. At least, that's what the rope is for most of us. For mortals. For Carrie, sometimes the rope became less a lifeline and more a tether. Sometimes it stood between her and the possibility of going on, going higher, a climb that had no end, no summit, no limitations. That's why she liked to climb free, without a rope, severing every tie with what came before and what might come after, living with her fingers, her hands, her toes always gripping the now. I knew that she climbed free because she told me, but she would never

BARBARA (cont'd.)

do it while I was around. I think she didn't want to infect me. And maybe she didn't want me to see what would happen if she ever came unglued from this moment.

(Lights rise on the top portion of the cliff, where CARRIE leans over, calling down to BARBARA.)

CARRIE

The view any good from that ledge?

BARBARA

The views are good everywhere here. I need some more water.

(BARBARA climbs back up to the cliff, climbing on the downstage side of the wall.)

CARRIE

So listen – this has all been very unfair, you know.

BARBARA

What?

CARRIE

Well, you know all about me, and what I do. I've showed you exactly, step by step. But you never talk about your life.

There's a reason for that.

BARBARA

And that reason would be...?

CARRIE

I'm boring.

BARBARA

No way!

CARRIE

Really, I –

BARBARA

No, that's just not true, and I'll tell you how I know.

CARRIE

I wish I was –

BARBARA

You learn quickly – you *like* to learn, which already sets you apart from most people. Most people build little boxes for their lives, and they're pretty much content to stay there. But you --

CARRIE

I'm exactly the same as everybody else, most of the time. I stay inside my box.

BARBARA

Not when you're around me.

CARRIE

No. Not when I'm around you.

BARBARA

Tell me what you do for a living.

CARRIE

You know what I do.

BARBARA

I know you're an actuary. But I have no idea what that means. What do actuaries really do?

CARRIE

BARBARA

We figure out when people are going to die.

CARRIE

What?

BARBARA

You look at certain factors – age, race, personal habits, occupation, health history, things like that – and you can usually get an accurate picture of how much longer a given person's going to live.

CARRIE

Wow.

BARBARA

There's more to it than that, but that's really the bottom line.

CARRIE

That's kind of –

BARBARA

Morbid? Yeah. The theory is that if you know when somebody's number is going to be up, you can determine how much it's going to cost society while they're still alive. It's useful information if you're running an insurance company.

(Lights cross-fade to THE SHERIFF and MARK as they enter the neutral area.)

THE SHERIFF

All right, today we're going to cover the section from the stream that branches off the Chute River to the big bend in State Road 23 near the top of Peerless Mountain. Before we get going, Mark wants to have a word with you.

MARK

Thanks, Sheriff. A lot of you – most of you, I guess – know Carrie. A lot of you have climbed with her, or with me. You know that the hardest part of the climb is near the top, when you're exhausted, when your body is telling you that there's nothing left. I think – I hope – that we're near the summit now, on this search. This is the time we've all got to dig down and find the reserve that puts us over the top. This is the last section of the search in the areas surrounding Spider Canyon, we're still in the area where Carrie's most likely to be. If she's hurt, or being held by somebody against her will, I know that none of us would want to turn back just before we reached the goal. And listen – thanks, all of you. It's a little easier, knowing that you're all here, giving everything you've got. Let's find her.

(Lights cross-fade to the cliff. The sound of Tibetan bells is heard again.
CARRIE and BARBARA both look out over the surrounding mountains.)

Look!	CARRIE
What –	BARBARA
Over there!	CARRIE
I don't see – oh!	BARBARA
See him?	CARRIE
Yeah. A hawk?	BARBARA
A golden eagle. They nest here.	CARRIE
God, he's – just –	BARBARA
Yeah. That is one lucky bird.	CARRIE
Un-huh. He gets to live here.	BARBARA
You got it. And if he feels like moving on, he just spreads his wings and goes.	CARRIE
It is gorgeous.	BARBARA
I miss this.	CARRIE
You miss -- ?	BARBARA
	CARRIE

This. Climbing, with nothing riding on it. No cash, no competition, no press. Just the rope, and the rock, and the sky. Good company. You know. It's like the way I felt – well, like the beginning.

(The sound of the bells fades out.)

Thank you. BARBARA

For what? CARRIE

For being more than an in-law. BARBARA

No sweat. You ready to head down? CARRIE

Let's go. BARBARA

(CARRIE and BARBARA start to climb down on the upstage side of the cliff. Lights cross-fade to the living room. MARK enters, dressed in outdoor clothing. He carries a daypack.)

Barb? MARK

I'm on my way! BARBARA (offstage)

Make sure to pack some Clif bars, it's going to be – MARK

(BARBARA enters. She also carries a daypack.)

I've got everything. BARBARA

Here, I filled up the water bottles. MARK

Thanks. BARBARA

(There is a knock on the door, offstage.)

SHERIFF (offstage)

Anybody home?

(MARK exits.)

MARK

Sheriff?

(MARK and THE SHERIFF enter)

SHERIFF

I was hoping to catch you folks before you went out to Jenner's Pass.

MARK

We were almost out the door.

SHERIFF

This won't take long. I expect we'll finish up the Pass today.

MARK

You're probably right.

SHERIFF

I hate to bring this up, because I really hope we find your wife. I hope we find her today. But Mark, we've got to face the fact that we're at the outside edge of the places we thought we were likely to find her if she was lost or injured.

MARK

What's on your mind?

SHERIFF

Up to now we've split our focus. We didn't know if it was a criminal matter or an accident. It's time we narrowed the field.

MARK

What does that mean?

SHERIFF

As you know, we've already started to look into the idea that someone might have abducted her. That's still a possibility. But there's also the chance that --

MARK

That somebody killed her?

SHERIFF

I surely hope that's not the case, but --

BARBARA

Where do you start?

SHERIFF

Right here, actually.

MARK

Here?

SHERIFF

I'd like to have your permission to have a crime scene unit come into the house here, and give it a good look-see.

MARK

Are you trying to say that --

SHERIFF

This doesn't mean we think you had anything to do with this --

MARK

But it also doesn't mean --

SHERIFF

It just means that if, God forbid, we find a body, we'd need some forensic evidence to compare, so that we could establish whether or not it's your wife.

BARBARA

Such as --

SHERIFF

Such as hair, from a hairbrush. Things like that.

BARBARA

Is Mark a suspect in this?

SHERIFF

Ms. Bering, nobody's a suspect yet.

BARBARA

But he might become a suspect.

SHERIFF

We start with no assumptions, Ms. Bering, one way or another. That's the only way we can proceed.

MARK

Bring your people in, Sheriff. I don't have anything to hide.

SHERIFF

Thank you. Listen, there was one other thing I wanted to ask. Ms. Bering, you used to go rock-climbing with Carrie, didn't you?

BARBARA

Absolutely. She taught me how to climb.

SHERIFF

Did she ever say anything to you about climbing in Spider Canyon?

BARBARA

No. No, she didn't.

SHERIFF

I didn't think so. Just wanted to make sure. I'll let you folks get out to the Pass. I hope the crime scene people will be done by the time you get back –

MARK

Tell them to take their time, Sheriff. I wouldn't want them to miss anything. Not if you think it might help to – well, if you think it might help.

SHERIFF

I'll give you a ring later.

MARK

Right.

(MARK and THE SHERIFF exit. BARBARA steps forward to the edge of the stage.)

BARBARA

Why didn't I say anything when he asked me about Spider Canyon? I don't know if anyone will understand. There is a mountain on the border between Nepal and India. , The Nepali people call it "The Five Treasure-Houses of the Snows." They believe that the summit of the mountain is sacred, a dwelling place for gods. Out of respect for the people who live in its shadow, people who climb it typically refrain from stepping on the actual summit of the mountain. They treat it as something holy ground. Spider Canyon may have been only a sixty-foot ascent, but on that vertical face I learned something about myself. It was, as much as anything in my life, a sacred place, and a sacred time. To let intruders into that space, and into the day I spent there with Carrie, felt like sacrilege. Also, at the moment the Sheriff asked the question, there was a little paranoid

edge in my mind, something that said: “Don’t give them a scent!” At the time, I was afraid there might be the spirit of a witch hunt gathering in the air.

(MARK, in his living room, with THE STRANGER, who is dressed in a business suit, and THE SHERIFF.)

SHERIFF

Mark, you’ve met Agent Shelton of the FBI.

MARK

Yeah. How are you?

THE STRANGER

Mr. Bering.

SHERIFF

Listen, Mark, you’ve been very cooperative so far, and I want to thank you for that. It’s made my job a lot easier, and, well – there’s just one thing more that we think would be really helpful.

MARK

And that would be?

THE STRANGER

We think it would help us wrap up some loose ends if you were to take a polygraph exam.

MARK

Excuse me?

SHERIFF

Mark, now listen. The Hegartys, these people you say you were giving a lesson to on the day Carrie – on the day you reported her as missing – we haven’t been able to track them down.

MARK

I told you –

SHERIFF

We tried every bed and breakfast in Muserville –

MARK

Maybe they –

SHERIFF

In fact, we've tried every B & B, every hotel and motel, for that matter, in a hundred-mile radius.

MARK

So they changed their plans, they decided to drive on that night. How am I supposed to know what they did?

SHERIFF

We appreciate that fact, it's just that --

THE STRANGER

There are rumors going around, you know how things get in a small town --

MARK

Maybe you should tell me how things get, sir.

SHERIFF

Mark --

MARK

Do things get to the point where frustrated cops start blaming innocent people for killing their wives?

SHERIFF

Mark, that's not what --

MARK

I guess I didn't hear him correctly --

THE STRANGER

Mr. Bering --

MARK

Because there is no way I'm going to listen to this --

THE STRANGER

Mr. Bering, the fact that rumors are flying is precisely the reason why we want to eliminate you as --

MARK

As a suspect?

THE STRANGER

As a *factor* in the disappearance of your wife. A polygraph examination --

MARK

Wouldn't be worth shit. That's why courts won't admit them as evidence in criminal trials.

THE STRANGER

You know something about this –

MARK

Only what I've read in the papers.

SHERIFF

Listen, Mark –

MARK

I can't believe you'd let them –

SHERIFF

Mark –

MARK

I've let you people interview me five times! I've told you everything I know!

THE STRANGER

Then you have nothing to fear from a polygraph.

MARK

Except the fact that they're completely unreliable. Why are you people wasting time?

THE STRANGER

It's because we want to –

MARK

It's because you don't have the faintest fucking idea what to do next!

THE STRANGER

That's not a very useful attitude, Mr. –

MARK

So you're just grasping at straws!

SHERIFF

Mark, I'm sorry that –

MARK

You should be sorry! You should be goddamned sorry you're wasting your time badgering me instead of looking for my wife!

SHERIFF

Mark –

MARK

You get out there and you look again!

THE STRANGER

What are your neighbors going to –

MARK

If you've run out of ideas then you go back over every single square inch of ground! But *don't* come into my house and pull this bullshit again.

THE STRANGER

There's going to be suspicion –

MARK

Not ever again, you hear me? Now get the fuck out of here!

(THE SHERIFF and THE STRANGER cross from the living room to the neutral area.)

THE STRANGER

Well. He's got himself a temper, doesn't he?

SHERIFF

He's lost his wife, he's upset.

THE STRANGER

Maybe.

SHERIFF

You really think...?

THE STRANGER

You really think we can rule it out?

SHERIFF

I don't know.

(THE SHERIFF and THE STRANGER exit. MARK, BARBARA and NAN enter the neutral area.)

MARK

Before I say anything, my mother-in-law has a statement she would like to read.

NAN

There has been speculation among many people about the possible involvement of my son-in-law, Mark Bering, in the disappearance of my daughter, Carrie Mueller Bering. I want to go on record and say that these allegations are absolutely preposterous. Anyone who has known Mark, and certainly anyone who ever saw Mark and Carrie together, would understand the kind of relationship they had, and would know that it's completely impossible that he played any role whatsoever in what happened to Carrie. Wherever Carrie is – and I pray that...I pray that she is alive and...well...I know that we'll be together again someday. I hope that...that's all.

(NAN turns away; BARBARA puts her arm around NAN as MARK steps to the forefront.)

MARK

No, there has been no new information... Yes, the FBI has been involved in the case, but you'll have to ask them... The official investigation is being run jointly by the FBI and by local authorities, you'll have to ask them...No, we're not confining our efforts to... Yes, we have hired private investigators... The search has extended over virtually

MARK (cont'd.)

the entire nation... We have a website, where people can learn about the case, and anyone who has seen Carrie, or who has any information about her whereabouts, can contact us... That's true...No, I haven't changed my mind...the reason is that lie detectors are inherently unreliable...I'm not going to comment on that...*I said I'm not going to comment on that*...That's all we have for you now...No more questions now!...*I SAID NO MORE QUESTIONS NOW!*

(NAN, BARBARA and MARK cross into the living room.)

MARK

Shit. You all right, mom?

NAN

I'll be fine. They're like vultures.

BARBARA

At least they give us publicity for the search.

MARK

Yeah, but at a price.

NAN

They're just plain rude, that's all. That's what I can't stand.

BARBARA

I guess they think they're justified.

MARK

Who gives a damn what they think? Mom, do you want something to drink, some iced tea?

NAN

Just some water would be fine, dear.

MARK

Coming up.

(MARK exits.)

BARBARA

You held up really well out there.

NAN

If it helps find her, then it's worth it.

BARBARA

I wish...

NAN

What, dear?

BARBARA

Sometimes I just wish that Mark would –

NAN

What?

BARBARA

He does antagonize them, when he loses his patience like that.

NAN

Can you blame him?

BARBARA

They wouldn't be so obnoxious if he just –

(MARK re-enters.)

MARK

If he just what?

BARBARA

Nothing.

MARK

Don't do this, Barbara.

BARBARA

It's just that there's a simple way to deal with this.

MARK

That's bullshit.

NAN

Barbara, if Mark --

BARBARA

I know you had nothing to do with any of this. Why not give everyone else a reason to believe in you the same way I do? You can make all the speculation go away, Mark, if you --

MARK

You don't have any idea what you're talking about.

BARBARA

I don't?

MARK

No, you don't. If I took the polygraph, and passed, you think it would stop people from thinking whatever they want? They'll just say the same thing I'm saying now, that the test isn't worth crap, and that I figured out some way to beat it. And since the test isn't worth the wires it's made of, I can't say I'd blame them.

BARBARA

It just looks bad.

MARK

You want to know what looks bad? I'll tell you. The police not being able to find a single damned clue, that looks bad. Bad for them. So they come up with some wild-ass guess so that people think they're doing their job. I am *not* going to let them make a target out of me because they don't know their ass from their elbow. And I'm not going to listen to this insidious horse shit from my own sister!

(MARK exits.)

NAN

He's been under so much pressure.

BARBARA

Can I ask you something? Do you ever wonder?

NAN

If he –

BARBARA

Yes.

NAN

I don't believe that. I honestly don't.

BARBARA

You never have any doubts?

NAN

You do?

BARBARA

If he would only – I suppose not.

NAN

If I let myself think that, then I'd be staring chaos straight in the eye. I'm not prepared to do that right now.

BARBARA

I'm so tired. Of all of it.

NAN

You need some sleep.

BARBARA

Fat chance.

NAN

Why don't you try? It would make me feel better if I knew that you at least tried to get some rest.

BARBARA

Okay.

(BARBARA exits. Lights cross-fade as NAN steps into the neutral area.)

NAN

When she was five, she climbed up on the roof of the barn. She wouldn't come down until it was almost dark. Maybe it was because the farm was so flat, but she couldn't get

enough of high places. She was never afraid. The first time we went to Seattle to see my sister, she couldn't take her eyes off the mountains. I wonder if she knew that she was seeing her destiny, right in front of her...I dreamt last night that we were both back in Springfield, on the farm, and I saw one of those cloud banks, that looks as if it's made of giant white bubbles from some cauldron on the other side of the sky, the kind where you can actually see the clouds change shape as you watch, churning through the air, way up high. These clouds were churning just that way, but the whole fluffy white mass was sitting right on the edge of our fields. And Carrie was walking toward them, carrying all the equipment she uses when she climbs. She looked back at me and smiled. Then I woke up, feeling like I was trying to grab something just out of reach. Neither one of us ever really believed that heaven was in the clouds. Neither of us ever thought God was that prosaic. Now I'm wide awake, and I don't know what to feel.

(NAN exits. Lights cross-fade to the living room as BARBARA enters, carrying several ream-sized boxes of paper. She sets them down, sits, opens one of the boxes and removes a poster with CARRIE's picture on it. MARK enters from the opposite side of the room, and places a coat on the back of the sofa.)

BARBARA

Hey.

MARK

Morning.

BARBARA

I picked up the new posters. I think the orange is more eye-catching. What do you think?

MARK

Yeah, it looks good.

BARBARA

Listen, what I said the other night –

MARK

Don't worry about it.

BARBARA

No, it was wrong of me to –

MARK

We've all been tense. Just forget about it.

(MARK kisses BARBARA's forehead. BARBARA shows MARK the flyer she has been holding in her hands.)

BARBARA

There's more contrast with the photo, don't you think? I think this one looks more like her than the others.

MARK

Let me see. Yeah, you're right.

(MARK goes offstage.)

BARBARA

Lem and I are going to go into Portage, really blitz the place.

MARK (from offstage)

I thought we'd already done Portage.

BARBARA

That was weeks ago. A lot of the old ones have probably been blown away or covered up anyway. Besides, maybe with something that's more vivid...Cynthia's going to man the hotline in the basement, she has the key. Did I tell you that she updated the web page? We've already gotten some hits.

MARK (offstage)

Great.

BARBARA

What's your plan for the day?

(MARK re-enters, carrying a suitcase.)

What's this?

MARK

I have a lecture.

BARBARA

What?

MARK

A lecture.

BARBARA

Where?

MARK

In Seattle.

BARBARA

But –

MARK

I have to make a living, Barb.

BARBARA

I can't believe this. There's work to be done here.

MARK

There's nothing I can do here that twenty other people aren't already doing. If she were anywhere around here, we would've found her by now. There isn't one square mile in this half of the state we haven't searched. We've got to face it – if she's alive, whatever's happened to her, she's someplace else.

BARBARA

If she's alive?

MARK

You know what I mean.

BARBARA

Are you giving up? Is that what's going on here?

MARK

No, I am not giving up!

BARBARA

Because if I'm in this alone, I want to know.

MARK

Listen to me. The School's a mess. Without Carrie here, I've had to hire someone else to teach, and it doesn't run itself. The book's about to slip off the bestseller list –

BARBARA

You're talking as if –

MARK

-- and I've got to milk it for everything it's worth if we're going to have enough cash to see us through the rest of the winter and keep paying for the private detectives.

BARBARA

And that's it?

MARK

What do you expect me to say? What do you want me to do?

BARBARA

Sometimes I wonder if I want to find her more than you do.

MARK

Meaning what?

BARBARA

Forget it.

MARK

I want to know what you're implying.

BARBARA

Nothing.

MARK

Because implications go both ways.

BARBARA

What are you –

MARK

What if you do want to find her more than I do? What does that say?

BARBARA

About what?

MARK

About you. And about Carrie.

BARBARA

I'm not hearing this.

MARK

She taught you how to climb –

BARBARA

That's right –

MARK

And what else?

BARBARA

I think you better leave.

MARK

What else?

BARBARA

Nothing. Nothing at all.

MARK

I'll be back the day after tomorrow.

(MARK exits. BARBARA looks in the direction of his departure for a moment, then exits to the other side of the stage. NAN enters the downstage portion of the neutral area.)

NAN

The way people look at you – not knowing what to say, not knowing how to treat you, not knowing if you're going to break down and crack into pieces right before their eyes – That's the worst part. Everyone has expectations. I'm supposed to be able to feel if she's alive. There's supposed to be some mystical bond between a mother and child that lets you know if the line that connects them to life, and to you, has been cut...but I don't know. And not knowing saps so much energy, every day... Everyone has hopes for a child, and so often, those hopes are dashed. The world takes a son, or a daughter, and changes them from what they were when they were an inseparable part of you. But with Carrie – the world took her to different places, she did things I could never have predicted, but she was always, always the best part of me. Can anybody tell me what you're supposed to do if you lose the best part of yourself?

(NAN leaves the downstage portion of the neutral area, and the lights cross-fade as BARBARA enters and stands near the base of the cliff.)

BARBARA

The first time I climbed with Carrie, I was about half way up the route when I fell. We were top-roping, so she was on belay from the bottom of the cliff. She was right on it, so I only fell about four or five feet. Still, it was enough to shock me into a different state of being. I grabbed onto the rope, which was absolutely taut, and I could feel every strand of nylon, and I prayed that I wasn't going to become an aberration in the statistics. Carrie lowered me to the ground. She took me by the shoulders and she made me look her right in the eye.

(CARRIE enters from behind the wall.)

CARRIE

How do you feel?

BARBARA

Scared!

CARRIE

How do you feel?!

BARBARA

I was scared!

CARRIE

How do you feel!

BARBARA

Alive!

(They hug briefly. CARRIE exits.)

BARBARA (cont'd.)

When I went back to Omaha, my cubicle on the fifteenth floor of the Republic Insurance Building felt like it had shrunken. It wasn't big enough any more to contain the person I wanted to be. I didn't want to spend the rest of my life figuring out when everybody else was going to die.

(BARBARA exits and the lights cross-fade as THE STRANGER, dressed as a sportscaster, enters the downstage portion of the neutral area, and speaks into a microphone.)

THE STRANGER

Carrie Bering, a champion rock climber, and her husband Mark, a climber who had conquered the highest peaks of the Himalayas and parlayed his experiences into another successful career as a travel and adventure writer, seemed like a couple leading a charmed life. They settled into this small mountain community and started a climbing school, which promised to provide them with a secure lifestyle. All these dreams were shattered this past summer, when Carrie Bering, in the midst of an ordinary day, disappeared. Although her car was soon discovered beside a lonely mountain road, no further trace of her has been found, despite a massive search that has involved hundreds of volunteers, and every resource available to both local law enforcement authorities and the FBI. Sources have told this reporter that the seemingly perfect marriage between these two talented athletes may have been subject to pressures that weren't always apparent to outsiders.

(Lights cross-fade as CARRIE enters the living room.)

CARRIE

Mark!

(MARK calls from offstage.)

MARK

I'm in here! I just got out of the shower.

Hon? CARRIE

Yeah? MARK

Is there anybody else here? CARRIE

(MARK enters, wearing a pair of boxer shorts, drying his hair with a towel.)

No. Why? MARK

Somebody's parked their car in our driveway. CARRIE

What kind of car? MARK

It's a Pathfinder. It looks brand new, it's still got the -- thing -- in the window. CARRIE

The "thing?" MARK

You know, the -- CARRIE

Sticker? MARK

Right. CARRIE

What color is it? MARK

It's blue. CARRIE

What a coincidence. MARK

Why would that be – CARRIE

Blue's your favorite color, right – MARK

What's that got to do with the price of yak milk in China? CARRIE

(MARK hands CARRIE a set of keys.)

Here. MARK

What...? CARRIE

I got tired of worrying about you driving around in that beat-up old wreck. MARK

Are you saying – CARRIE

I'm saying that I bought you a new car. MARK

(CARRIE, stunned, stands perfectly still.)

Do you like it?

We can't – CARRIE

What's the point of having a book on the bestseller list for almost a year if I can't buy my wife a new car? MARK

I'm just – surprised. CARRIE

Is it that you don't – MARK

No, no, hon. It's not that. CARRIE

MARK

What's wrong?

CARRIE

Not a thing. I love it. We should take it for a drive.

MARK

Sounds great. Let me put some clothes on.

(MARK exits. CARRIE moves to the window and looks out. She moves to sit on the couch.)

CARRIE

Hon?

MARK

Yeah?

CARRIE

Did I tell you that Tony McKay called?

MARK

No. What did he want?

CARRIE

He wanted to know if you were interested in going back out on an assignment for the magazine.

(MARK re-enters, carrying socks and hiking boots, which he dons as he speaks with CARRIE.)

MARK

Where does he want me to go?

CARRIE

He just said "The Turquoise Goddess, from the north."

(MARK stops whatever he is doing. The sound of Tibetan bells is heard, very softly at first, growing louder throughout the rest of the scene.)

What did he mean by that? Are you okay?

MARK

Cho Oyu. From the Tibetan side. There are still some interesting routes that haven't been climbed there.

Cho Oyu – how high?
CARRIE

About 8200 meters.
MARK

A shade under –
CARRIE

27,000 feet. Yeah.
MARK

Have you been there yet?
CARRIE

(MARK shakes his head “no.”)

Tempted?
MARK

I don’t think so.
CARRIE

If you want to go, I’ll take care of the school.
MARK

Naw, it’s all right.
CARRIE

You sure?
MARK

They just want me because I’m good at chronicling climbing disasters. They’re hoping somebody will die up there.
CARRIE

Hon, this is Tony.
MARK

You really think he’s different?
CARRIE

Yeah, actually I – Listen, if it weren’t for the magazine, if it were just an offer to go on the expedition for the sake of the climb, would you want to go?

MARK

I don't know.

CARRIE

You've got to get back on the horse sometime.

MARK

You mean I've got to go back to the Himalayas. Back up to the big peaks.

CARRIE

That's up to –

MARK

Why? Why should I go back?

CARRIE

I didn't mean –

MARK

Would you be disappointed if I didn't? If I didn't ever go back?

CARRIE

No. Just a little –

MARK

A little...?

CARRIE

Surprised, that's all.

MARK

There are some things I left out of the book. Some things I never told anyone, not even you.

CARRIE

You don't have to – If you don't --

MARK

We went up the Abruzzi Ridge, it's the classical line, the line of the first ascent. Theoretically, the easiest route – “easiest.” I'm talking like an idiot. In a situation where every option is all but impossible, a term like “easiest” really ceases to have any meaning. We hadn't heard anything on the radio since the previous night. At that height – everyone knew what it meant. A night out in the mountain, with no tent, no bag. There wasn't any way he was... Trying to find Doug was stupid, we knew that the monsoon was starting any day, another storm could come in any time, they come up so fast, no warning, just the way it happened to Doug. We weren't safe even where we were, in

camp three. To go back up into the Death Zone was an insane risk. But we had spent too much time too high on the mountain, everyone was feeling the altitude, with so little oxygen getting to your brain it makes your thoughts bend into the strangest shapes, everyone gets stupid after a while. So we went up to find him, to see if he was still...Terje and I started before dawn, the wind had died down a little, we thought we could...By around noon, we were about 300 meters from the summit, we were traversing, we came around a bend – and there he was, on a ledge just wide enough for him to sit with his knees pulled up near his chest. He was tied in to the mountain, the snow had covered most of him. His eyes were open. I don't know why, but I hadn't expected that. There was a thin layer of ice covering his face, his lips were slightly parted, the sunlight was striking him, it refracted the color of his irises, for some reason it struck me – in the light, his eyes looked almost violet. I don't know why I remember that. We could feel

MARK (cont'd.)

the summit. I looked at Terje, I knew he felt the same way, we both wanted to go for it, to stand where Doug had wanted to stand. But the clouds were already boiling up from the valley. They were just below us, it looked as if we could step out and walk across the clouds. I'm sure that half of the people who fall off mountains don't fall at all, they just give in to the illusion, expecting to walk home on that endless white carpet. I couldn't decide what to do, whether to climb on or walk out onto the mist. Climbing down seemed like the most ridiculous idea in the world. When I looked over at Terje, he had started down. No word to me, no signal. I started after him. I wonder if he knew that he saved my life. Later on, after he had fallen, after I dragged him back to camp three, after I watched him die from the fluid that gathered on his lungs and choked him, I wished that we had talked about what happened when we found Doug. I wished I had thanked him for climbing down, for saving me from myself. I wished I had spoken those simple words to him – “thank you” – but I didn't get the chance. So now I talk about it, I talk to you, I talk to strangers who pay me money to listen, I talk to anyone who cares to hear, all the time hoping that the words will make me forget Doug's face, or the sound of Terje retching in the tent for three nights running, forget the sound of the wind whipping the tent around our heads. And I buy things so I can forget what it's like to be in the middle of frozen emptiness, to forget all the time I spent embracing nothing, as if there was some gift it had to give me.

(CARRIE kneels next to MARK, and presses his head to her breasts. They stay silent for a moment. CARRIE pulls away, takes MARK's hand and starts to pull him up. The sound of the bells fades away.)

CARRIE

C'mon.

MARK

What -- ?

CARRIE

Let's go for a drive.

(CARRIE and MARK exit. Lights cross-fade to THE SHERIFF in the neutral area.)

SHERIFF

After a while, things start to dwindle. The F.B.I. packs its bags and goes back to Washington, volunteers realize that their own lives are passing by. Hope shrinks, and all that's left are the people who get paid to keep looking, and the people who can't let go of the last dregs.

(THE SHERIFF exits, and the lights cross-fade to the living room as NAN, wearing pajamas and a bathrobe, enters. She carries a glass of milk. She sits on the couch. She drinks from the glass. BARBARA, also wearing a bathrobe, enters.)

BARBARA

Can't sleep?

NAN

No.

BARBARA

Um.

NAN

Thank you.

BARBARA

For what?

NAN

For helping, with all this. The search, everything.

BARBARA

It's nothing.

NAN

That can't be true. You didn't have to be here, after all. I know you love your brother.

BARBARA

I do. But I also loved Carrie. She was a friend to me. She...

NAN

You were about to say?

BARBARA

She gave me a part of myself I never knew I had. Some people have the power to do that.

NAN

Yes. How are you – how have you managed to arrange to take so much time off?

BARBARA

Time off?

NAN

I'm sure your employer would like to know when you're going to be back.

BARBARA

Oh, ah... I quit.

NAN

You...? I didn't know that.

(CARRIE enters the neutral area. She looks dazed as she moves across the stage. She sits down. A reflection of the gumball lights atop a police car flash across the neutral area. THE STRANGER enters, dressed in the uniform of a Georgia State Trooper.)

THE STRANGER

Miss?

BARBARA

I knew Mark would need me.

(CARRIE looks at THE STRANGER, but does not respond.)

THE STRANGER

Excuse me, miss?

BARBARA

And anyway, I couldn't --

CARRIE

Do you know -- ?

BARBARA

-- be anyplace else until we find her.

THE STRANGER

Are you okay, Miss?

NAN

You still think we'll --

CARRIE

I don't know, maybe you can – I –

BARBARA

Yes, I do.

THE STRANGER

Miss, are you hurt?

BARBARA

I absolutely do.

CARRIE

I don't think so.

NAN

What do you think happened?

THE STRANGER

Listen, Miss, do you have any ID on you?

BARBARA

I'm not sure.

CARRIE

I don't know. Let me look.

NAN

Your best guess.

(CARRIE searches the pockets of her fleece jacket, but finds nothing.)

CARRIE

It doesn't seem I have any...

BARBARA

I think something happened to make her lose her memory.

CARRIE

I don't know where it all went –

NAN

Amnesia.

THE STRANGER

Miss, can you tell me your name?

BARBARA

Yes. I think she's somewhere else now—

CARRIE

No. I don't know.

BARBARA

-- and she doesn't know who she is --

CARRIE

Oh, God, I don't know!

BARBARA

-- or where she belongs.

THE STRANGER

All right, just take it easy, miss.

BARBARA

And I really believe that sometime soon --

CARRIE

Where am I?

BARBARA

-- she'll remember --

THE STRANGER

You're a few miles outside of Macon, Georgia.

BARBARA

And she'll come back.

CARRIE

Georgia?

THE STRANGER

That's right, Miss.

NAN

When she was little, I only had one rule.

THE STRANGER

Do you know where you're from?

NAN

She could do anything she wanted --

CARRIE

I have no idea how I got here!

NAN

As long as I could still keep my eye on her.

THE STRANGER

But do you know where you're from?

NAN

I didn't want her to grow up to be timid.

CARRIE

No!

NAN

Not that there was much chance of that.

THE STRANGER

All right now --

NAN

She would test me.

THE STRANGER

I'm sure it'll come back --

NAN

She'd climb trees --

CARRIE

Can you help me? Please?

NAN

She'd go all the way to the top --

CARRIE

I don't know where I am!

NAN

Until all I could see was the sole of her sneakers.

CARRIE

I don't know – I don't know how I -- !

NAN

She'd go all the way to the edge --

THE STRANGER

Okay, miss—

NAN

But she'd always pull back –

THE STRANGER

-- why don't you come back to the station with me --

NAN

Just at the last minute.

THE STRANGER

-- we'll get you some food – Here we go --

(THE STRANGER helps CARRIE to her feet.)

BARBARA

You think that's what's happened here?

THE STRANGER

-- a place to rest –

NAN

That's what I believe.

THE STRANGER

-- maybe we can figure it out, okay?

BARBARA

Me, too.

CARRIE

Help me!

(NAN rises, crosses to BARBARA, and places her hand on BARBARA's cheek.)

THE STRANGER

All right miss, you come on with me.

(THE STRANGER helps CARRIE as they both exit.)

NAN

Bless you.

(NAN kisses BARBARA's forehead.)

I'm going up to bed. You should think about doing the same.

BARBARA

In a little while.

(BARBARA picks up the remote control for the television. She points it at the audience and clicks it several times, surfing through various programs. When she finally puts the remote down, we hear the voice of a news reporter.)

THE STRANGER (voiceover)

The posters asking for information about the whereabouts of Carrie Bering have mostly been ripped off walls and telephone polls by the wind that rips through the Barrister Mountains in the winter. Search efforts for the missing climber continue, but hope for her safe return has dimmed as the thermometer has dropped in the small city of Culver, which sits at the base of the mountains. The tragedy goes beyond the disappearance of a talented young athlete...

(The lights rise on the downstage portion of the neutral area and THE STRANGER enters.)

THE STRANGER

...The cost can be measured in family ties that have been tested, and in some cases broken, by the uncertain agony that has ensued since the June day when Carrie Bering stepped out of the house she and her husband purchased last spring, and into oblivion. After search efforts were unsuccessful, and the case became a criminal matter, Mark Bering, on advice of counsel, refused to take a polygraph exam. Recently, ESPN 2 spoke with Carrie's mother, Nan Mueller, about the progress of the investigation.

(Lights rise on NAN in a separate part of the neutral area. THE STRANGER crosses to her, microphone in hand. As he does so, the lights fade from the living room and BARBARA exits.)

THE STRANGER (cont'd.)

Mrs. Mueller, initially, you and other family members stood by Mark when he declined to submit to a lie detector test.

NAN

It was inconceivable to us that Mark had harmed Carrie in any way.

THE STRANGER

What caused you to change your mind?

NAN

After the first weeks of the search had passed, everyone was still optimistic about finding Carrie, but Mark seemed to give up. He wanted to resume a normal life, and that frightened us.

THE STRANGER

You say it frightened you? In what way?

NAN

It wasn't normal. It takes longer for most people to recover from something that traumatic. It was as if he was trying too hard to put her behind him. That's what made us suspicious.

THE STRANGER

Do you believe he killed Carrie?

(long pause)

NAN

I don't want to speculate about that.

THE STRANGER

But you must have some feeling, in your heart.

NAN

I think he loved her. Sometimes love twists in on itself, it gets warped. I don't know if that's what's happened here.

THE STRANGER

But –

NAN

But I know there's one simple way for Mark to help us put those fears aside.

THE STRANGER

And that would be for him to take the polygraph?

NAN

That's right.

THE STRANGER

You believe that would answer your questions.

NAN

I have no idea. It would answer certain questions, surely.

THE STRANGER

I understand that some members of Mark's own family agree with you.

NAN

Barbara, she's Mark's sister, believes that he should take the exam.

THE STRANGER

I'm not sure that anyone can imagine what you've been going through these past months. How do you get through the days?

NAN

By participating in the search, which goes on throughout the country. That keeps me busy, and keeps me moving in a positive direction.

THE STRANGER

And you believe that she's still alive, still out there somewhere.

NAN

As long as no one can prove to me that she's gone, I'll feel...She'll always be alive to me.

THE STRANGER

Don Fisher, ESPN 2, reporting from Springfield, Illinois.

(MARK sits on the couch in the living room. He drinks from a glass of whiskey. He runs his hands over the prayer rug. He pulls the rug off the back of the couch and spreads it out on the living room floor, downstage. BARBARA enters, carrying a suitcase.)

BARBARA

I left my key on the dresser in the spare bedroom.

(MARK says nothing.)

BARBARA

Cindy will be in tomorrow to check the phones. She's going to keep updating the web page. She's usually here by nine, so --

MARK

I'll let her in.

BARBARA

Right.

(BARBARA moves toward MARK.)

I can't stay here.

MARK

I'm aware of that.

BARBARA

I'm still going to be part of the search, it's just –

MARK

I know.

BARBARA

It's not that I really think you had anything to –

MARK

Can we not say anything stupid? Can we avoid that, please?

BARBARA

Fine. I'll go.

(BARBARA picks up her suitcase and starts to exit.)

MARK

I didn't kill her.

(BARBARA stops and turns to face MARK.)

One day, you have this life. Work that you enjoy, friends, a wife you love, a new house. And it all fits together. Then you pull one part out – and the rest of it doesn't add up any more. I try to figure out what would hurt most. If she was killed while she was climbing, I could get around that, I could deal with it. She loved to climb. If you die doing what you love, at least the end has some meaning, some connection to the life that went before. If someone took her, hurt her, killed her...at least I would have someone to hate, someone to blame. There would be a focus.

(Sounds of a diesel truck pulling up, it brakes squealing as it stops. THE STRANGER, dressed in blue jeans and a flannel shirt, and wearing a baseball cap with the logo of a large trucking corporation, brings two folding chairs onstage in the neutral area. He sets the chairs side by side, about two feet apart. As he does so, the reflection of a red neon sign,

blinking on and off, spills across the floor of the stage. The sound of the diesel truck, its engine idling, continues until otherwise noted. THE STRANGER stands in front of the two chairs, smoking a cigarette. CARRIE, wearing her fleece jacket, enters.)

MARK

But if she just went off –

CARRIE

Good evenin’.

THE STRANGER

Miss.

MARK

That would be...

CARRIE

How you doing tonight?

THE STRANGER

Just about how the Lord intended. Which is just fine.

CARRIE

Glad to hear it.

MARK

What am I supposed to think about that?

THE STRANGER

Listen, miss, did you get a look at the back of my trailer?

CARRIE

Can’t say that I did.

MARK

What am I supposed to feel?

THE STRANGER

Well, if you step around to the back, you’ll see that I’ve got a sign on it that urges motorists to attend a house of worship of their choice on Sundays.

MARK

Can I ask you something?

BARBARA

Yes.

THE STRANGER

Which I do myself, in the local Baptist church wherever I find myself come Sunday.

MARK

How selfish do you think it would be...

THE STRANGER

You see what I mean?

MARK

To prefer that someone you love be dead...

CARRIE

I'm not sure.

MARK

Rather than just...

THE STRANGER

I'm only saying that I take my faith seriously.

MARK

Gone?

THE STRANGER

Some people here might be buyin' whatever it is you're sellin', but I'm not in the market.

MARK

When that goes through my head—

CARRIE

You think I'm a hooker?

MARK

-- when I realize that's what I'm actually thinking --

THE STRANGER

I'm not judgin' anyone, miss –

MARK

I can't –

CARRIE

Do I *look* like a lady of the evening?

THE STRANGER

Well, no actually. If I had to guess.

MARK

Whichever direction my mind turns—

CARRIE

I'm not. I'm not a hooker.

MARK

There's guilt.

THE STRANGER

I'm relieved to hear it.

CARRIE

Honest.

THE STRANGER

I believe you.

MARK

Whichever direction my hands reach—

CARRIE

Actually, I've been walking –

MARK

-- There's nothing solid enough to hold on to.

THE STRANGER

You do look a little the worse for wear.

MARK

It makes me wish I could disappear myself.

THE STRANGER

Over the mountains? You walked over the --

MARK

What do you think of that?

CARRIE

I surely did.

BARBARA

I don't know.

THE STRANGER

Hot damn!

BARBARA

If you want to know the truth --

CARRIE

Over fifty miles.

BARBARA

I haven't known what to think for a long time.

THE STRANGER

You must be in pretty good shape.

BARBARA

I have to go.

CARRIE

I guess so.

(BARBARA exits. MARK sits, staring straight ahead.)

THE STRANGER

I guess you're right.

CARRIE

Listen...Where you headed tonight?

THE STRANGER

Oregon. Portland.

CARRIE

That's a long way to drive all alone.

THE STRANGER

My company's got a rule against picking up strangers.

CARRIE

You always abide by that rule?

THE STRANGER

Always have in the past.

CARRIE

Well, I guess...wouldn't want to spoil a perfect record. Sorry I bothered you.

(CARRIE begins to exit. She stops, and turns back to face THE STRANGER. MARK picks up his glass of whiskey and bolts it down. The sound of the Tibetan bells begins to echo, softly at first, then louder as the scene draws to a close.)

Sir?

THE STRANGER

Miss?

CARRIE

You ever worship at the Corinth Baptist Church over in Culver?

THE STRANGER

Once or twice.

CARRIE

You ever stop for the barbecue after the service during the summer?

THE STRANGER

Yes. Yes, I have.

CARRIE

Mrs. Sickles makes the best fried chicken you ever tasted, don't you think?

THE STRANGER

She does at that. You in some sort of trouble, miss?

CARRIE

I haven't broken the law. Nothing like that. But I could use some help.

THE STRANGER

I've always thought we were put on this earth to lend a hand to each other.

CARRIE

Me, too.

(MARK kneels on the prayer rug and tries to pray.)

THE STRANGER

If I let you come along, you think you could keep it kind of quiet?

CARRIE

I wouldn't say a word.

THE STRANGER

And if someone from the Conway Trucking Corporation were to ever ask you –

CARRIE

I never met you, never even heard of you, and I certainly *never* got a ride in your truck.

THE STRANGER

Fair enough. You ready to go?

CARRIE

Whenever you are.

THE STRANGER

Let me open up your side.

(THE STRANGER moves to sit in the stage left chair. He reaches over and mimes opening the passenger-side door. CARRIE sits in the stage right chair. Sounds of the truck getting underway – brakes releasing, engine revving, gears shifting. Lights from passing cars play across their faces as CARRIE and THE STRANGER pull onto the road. MARK bends over, putting his face down on the rug.)

Name's George Brinkley, by the way.

CARRIE

Carrie – you mind if we just keep it at that? Just “Carrie?”

THE STRANGER

Nope.

CARRIE

Thanks.

(His face still down on the rug, MARK's arms reach out and grab the front corners of the prayer rug.)

THE STRANGER

This trouble you left back in Culver – you think it's gonna stay there, or you think it'll follow you?

CARRIE

It might try, but I don't think it will catch up with me. I really don't.

(MARK sits up, pulling the front of the rug with him, clutching it to his face. He half-falls to one side, and winds up in a seated position, facing upstage, hugging the rug to his breast. Lights fade until only downlight is left on MARK, leaving him bathed in shadow.)

THE STRANGER

Well, for your sake, I hope it doesn't.

CARRIE

Me, too.

THE STRANGER

Anything back there you regret leaving behind?

CARRIE

One or two things, maybe.

(The sound of the Tibetan bells dies out as the lights fade slowly on MARK. THE STRANGER points to something far away.)

THE STRANGER

Lookit there!

CARRIE

God!

THE STRANGER

Heat lightning.

CARRIE

Makes the clouds glow.

THE STRANGER

That it does.

CARRIE

How far off, you think?

THE STRANGER

Hard to say. Thirty, forty miles, I guess...

(THE SHERIFF appears at the base of the cliff.)

THE SHERIFF

So we never found out what happened. If there's anybody out there who does know, they're certainly not tellin'. Out here, there aren't that many cases we don't figure out. It's a small reward, but it counts. But this one – well...The case is still open. Technically speaking. But the more time passes, the less I expect we'll ever crack it. And that pisses me off, if you want to know the truth.

(Lights fade on THE SHERIFF.)

THE STRANGER

Long drive tonight. You up for some music?

CARRIE

Sure.

THE STRANGER

There's a box of CD's right behind your seat. Why don't you pick one?

CARRIE

No, no, no. Driver's choice.

THE STRANGER

Ladies first. You go ahead.

(CARRIE mimes pulling out a CD.)

CARRIE

What would you say to Willie Nelson?

THE STRANGER

I'd say that's a fine choice.

(CARRIE mimes inserting the CD into the player mounted in the truck's dashboard. Willie Nelson's version of "Across the Borderline" plays.)

You think you'll ever go back? Where you came from?

CARRIE

No. Not in this lifetime.

(The lights fade to black.)